

Age-Oriented Tips for Helping Girls Build an Athlete Identity in Sports

Sports are a powerful vehicle to help girls reach their full potential. Anyone can play a role in supporting girls by getting them started and engaged in sports. Many girls continue to play sports because they have developed an athlete identity: “I am a soccer player!” rather than, “I play soccer.” Girls that develop athlete identities with support are more likely to stay in sports through their lives. Here are age-oriented tips for getting and keeping girls in the game:

Ages 0-4

PreK

- Engage girls in sports and play at the very start to help build comfort with athletics to last a lifetime. Girls can jump into sports fun well before Kindergarten.
- Find ways to get her active and playing. Any and all babies, toddlers, and young children—including girls—enjoy playing with soft balls, kicking, running, jumping, playing games, and being active.
- Introduce girls to sport early on through home and community-based play, clinics, beginner leagues, classes, and events (local girls’/ women’s sports leagues in person and media, e.g., watch a women’s basketball game if sports are viewed at home).

Ages 5-7

K-2nd
Grade

- Girls love physical activity, wanting to run, move and get dirty. Harness the energy by creating fun, dynamic practices. Help connect sports to positive fitness, feeling good.
- Support building motor skills, e.g., balance and coordination through group games while introducing to sport-specific skills. Notice girls that might be hesitant, and bring them in!
- Sessions should feel fun, positive, and playful. Offer encouragement and positive reinforcement. Use regular water breaks and engaging practice plans.
- Incorporate some healthy competition (games!), sharing about rules and keeping score to help girls work towards goals, build teamwork, and prepare for future sports levels.

Ages 8-10

3rd-5th
Grade

- Respect girls’ individuality and support a broad sense of what it means to be a girl. Girls at this age continue to love to run and play hard.
- Building expertise balanced with joy. Help girls become more excited about mastery, performance and competition, while incorporating fun (e.g., new goals at each game).
- Give specific feedback on skill improvement. For example, try remarking, “I appreciate your hustle, Marisol. Now get your feet into position before you bump the volleyball.”
- Include balance of competitive games; avoid over-emphasis on winning / losing.

**Ages
11-13**

5th-8th
Grade

- Encourage girls to see sport as a part of identity. This is the crucial time when girls stick with a sport and identify as an athlete and some stop playing for a variety of reasons. Some are still new to sport and benefit from inclusive and welcoming attitudes.
- Have conversations with each girl and encourage her to play. If a girl ceases playing, try finding out why because you may still be able to help

eliminate barriers, and the information can help generally improve the program.

- Skill development. Girls want to work hard (e.g., in games, tournaments) and see their skills advance. Teach healthy habits too (i.e., warm-up, nutrition, strengthening). Encourage girls to stretch to new heights and be partners in the sports journey.

**Ages
14-18**

9th-12th
Grade

- Give opportunities to compete, progress and perform as many girls will engage more seriously in sport, while meeting girls where they're at, if beginning.
- Be a trusted, consistent adult on which they can rely and learn. Be available to talk (referring to other caring adults / experts as needed, depending on topic); treat them with respect, support, and positivity.
- Continue holding high expectations and help develop skills that translate

off the field. Share team guidelines (e.g., be on time, give 100%), inviting girls to comment and add, supporting team ownership.

- Continue to engage in skill-appropriate competitions (league; scrimmages; to test their skills against other teams.
- Help girls consider a lifetime of physical fitness, activity and sports enjoyment! Girls can reach toward college athletic scholarships, club teams, and ongoing adult leagues.

